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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an elective literature course that examines the cultural and historical context of Western United States literary works for insights into the whole of United States culture. From a definition of the "West" that has both geographical and mythical dimensions, the following major images emerge for study: Eden, El Dorado, the New Jerusalem, the Passage to India, empire, and the wilderness visions of the West. Through a close textual study of notable Western fiction, and consideration of "Eastern" fiction with the same themes, this course defines the Western experience, illuminates the tension between old and new, and explores the tragic aspect of the American dream of the West as one that destroys itself in the process of its realization. (MAI)

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Western Literature: A Window on America

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The study of "regional" literature is generally regarded as a minor endeavor for the serious literary scholar and critic. Often equated with "local color," it might satisfy the provincial interests of the region, or provide quaint insight into the ways of a local folk, but it seems to have limited application to the broader study of literary art. Western American literature labors not only under this burden, but also under categorical association with the melodramatic tradition of the Beadle Dime Novel, pulp magazine westerns, Zane Grey, Luke Short, the grade B western movie, John Wayne, and the heroic cowboy of television. In short, "western" fiction is considered under a stereotype of superficial adventure and violence in the "wide open spaces." As Wallace Stegner has observed of the western writer, the critic of western writing may also find himself in a box booby-trapped at both ends. Like the western writer, the critic may find himself "so unfashionable as to be practically voiceless."[1]

In recent years these stereotypes have been elaborated somewhat by the anti-hero and the sympathetic Indian, but the underlying patterns are the same.

These assumptions, not always articulated but almost always present, have made the writing of serious literary works set in the West, and the study of such works, downright hazardous to a literary career. One need only read the reviews of Clark's Ox-Bow Incident, or Davis's Honey in the

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Horn, or other novels set in the West. The frustration felt by such serious writers as Vardis Fisher, Frank Waters, A.B. Guthrie, Jr. and Harvey Fergusson, as they see their work received as regional, while works set in Manhattan or New Hampshire or Mississippi are treated as somehow universal (Fisher calls these "easterns"), has been frequently recorded.[2]

Frank Waters some years ago sent a manuscript to his publisher in New York for consideration. The publisher's response was that the novel should be published, but that since it contained such esoteric western terms as "chaps" and "levis," it should have a glossary to help the reader. In the same mail that brought that letter to Waters, there arrived a novel issued by the same publisher. That novel was set on Manhattan Island and contained a large number of Yiddish terms, but no glossary.

The scholar meets similar problems. I have a colleague who some years back wrote his dissertation on James Fenimore Cooper, but who slightingly refers to another colleague's work on the mountain man in literature as study of the "fur-bearing novel."

On the other hand, a course labelled "Literature of the American West" might seem to concede the regional nature of the material. Perhaps so, in a sense, but I propose the thesis that the study of the West in American literature offers significant insights into the whole of American culture. Although the course title may be regional, the implications can quickly expand to include not only national life, but even the whole of western civilization. For some ten years I have taught a course in western literature that attempts just such an expansion. Rather than making generalizations, I would like to offer it as a specific example of how such possibilities can be developed.

My course is an elective at the freshman level and, as might be expected, draws a large number of non-majors with little previous experience in the serious study of literature. I confess that some of these take the course for the wrong reasons, expecting to spend the semester reading about rustlers and gun fights and Indian raids, but seldom do student evaluations at the end of the course express disappointment that these expectations were not met.

The course is set in a historical framework that makes it almost an American Studies course, rather than one restricted to American literature. This framework helps clarify the basic ideas underlying each novel (it is primarily a novel course simply because of the problems of availability of textbook materials), and helps relate each work to the cultural context from which it arises. I do not deal with American Indian literature or with Chicano literature--other courses in our curriculum do that, and such breadth would diffuse the focus of the course too much.

At the outset we examine what we mean by "the West," both geographically and as a mythical set of expectations. We glance at the Old Testament story of Adam and Eve leaving Eden through the eastern gate, thus making Eden to the West, then at the various classical myths of the "Fortunate Isles" somewhere in the western seas. These images can be traced through the Middle Ages and well into the Renaissance, setting the stage for what Europeans expected to find in America as they explored the New World. What they expected to find was often more important than what was actually, physically there.[3]

From this we evolve "images" of the West that we will find in the novels we will examine during the rest of the semester. The major images we use include Eden, El Dorado, the New Jerusalem, the Passage to India, empire, and wilderness visions of the West. The wilderness image, in addition, is

considered both in its negative, "stronghold of Satan" version and its positive, normative version as a place of perfect freedom and uncorrupted nature.[4]

We briefly turn our attention, also, to delineating the West as a modern region. The possible eastern boundary can range all the way from the Appalachian Mountains to the Rockies, and many students propose the Mississippi River, but we finally arrive at something like Walter Prescott Webb's definition of the West as an essentially arid region whose eastern boundary lies at the eastern edge of the prairies, approximately along the line at which the annual rainfall drops below twenty inches a year. This would be at about the 98th or 99th meridian through the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. At about this line, Webb says, there was a cultural discontinuity caused by the change from humid to arid climate.

> Practically every institution...was either broken and remade or else greatly altered. The ways of travel, the weapons, the method of tilling the soil, the plows and other agricultural implements, and even the laws themselves were modified.[5]

While the students are reading their way into the first assigned novel, we may examine two or three poems in which our images of the West occur. Most useful here are Whitman's "Passage to India," and MacLeish's "American Letter." These works give the students short, manageable instances of the imaginative, conceptual use of such images of the West in literary works.

Our first novel is A.B. Guthrie's The Big Sky. In Boone Caudill we have the dream of the West as an escape from time into space, as a place of complete freedom. In some of the minor figures we have other images of the West: Jourdonnais and El Dorado, Peabody and empire. But the center of the novel lies in Boone Caudill's search for complete freedom, both from social constraint and from the passage of time. Thus early in the course we introduce the essentially tragic aspect of the American dream of the West as one that

inevitably destroys itself in the very process of its realization. This is finally articulated by Dick Summers near the end of the novel: "There was beaver for us and free country and a big way of livin', and everything we done it looks like we done against ourselves and couldn't do different if we'd knowed. . . . It's like we heired money and had to spend it, and now it's nigh gone."[6]

Following approximately in the line of the historical development of the West, we next read Owen Wister's The Virginian, perhaps the closest, of the works we will read, to the traditional "horse opera" treatment of the West. In this novel of the "cattle kingdom" West of the open range, we consider the divergence of the old, free West of the mountain man and his descendant, the footloose, irresponsible young cowboy (the Virginian as we see him at the beginning of the book), and the West as a region of economic resources to be developed by the energetic and the enterprising (the Virginian as wealthy rancher and coal mine operator at the end of the novel). Like Boone Caudill, the Virginian has fled his own origins and set out to create a new self in a new life. Boone Caudill married the wilderness West in the person of Teal Eye of the Piegans, and thus continued to seek wilderness freedom; the Virginian forsakes the freedom of his youth to marry eastern civilization in the person of Molly Wood. Although the students may sympathize more with Boone Caudill's pursuit of wilderness freedom, the future belonged to the man who filed homestead papers on coal-bearing lands, and sold the coal to the railroad. That is an American story, not just a western pattern. That story can be found in the works of James, Howells, Twain, Dreiser, Lewis, Fitzgerald, and many more who are not regarded as western writers. On the other hand, the direct clarity of the frontier images makes this pattern, and the reason behind it, clearly discernible when it is set in the West.

The Ox-Bow Incident, our next novel in the course, provides a valuable contrast to The Virginian in a number of ways. Most obviously, there is the comparison of the treatment each novel gives of the use of lynching in the "taming" of the West. More basically, Ox-Bow takes the masculine virtues celebrated in The Virginian and other western novels in that tradition--notably physical courage and skill in the use of weapons--and shows how unthinking preoccupation with such virtues, or the appearance of such virtues, can destroy rather than preserve human society in the West.

In showing us the dangers of western "machismo," Clark also shows us one of the ironies of our standard assumptions about the West. The West of the cattle kingdoms was generally assumed to be free, informal, ahistorical. Yet in a land where most men went armed, and worked at dangerous jobs in which the weakness or incompetence of a fellow worker could get a man killed, there was actually a good deal of social ritual and conscious role playing. Ox-Bow is not a novel about the innate brutality of men. Rather, it is a novel about men (and a woman) trapped by their pasts in patterns of behavior based on outmoded tests of masculinity. This, of course, opens the door to discussion of the role of such ideas of masculinity in contemporary society, and the roots of those ideas in the frontier experience.

Of course, there was more to the settlement of the West than mountain men and cowboys, so the next novel we examine deals with the homesteader. I have used other novels for this step in the development of the course, for example Cather's My Antonia and O Pioneers, but Ole Rolvaag's Giants in the Earth has thus far been most effective for my purposes. Per Hansa's agrarian dreams of Eden on the prairies, contrasted with Beret's vision of the West as a wilderness of satanic forces, provides an excellent basis for examination of these two images of the West. Both views lead, by different routes, to a

vision of the western wilderness as something to be "conquered" by settlement. From this it is an easy step to the modern real estate developer's idea that progress is measured by cubic yards of concrete poured, numbers of new structures built, or new subdivisions platted and sold. Consideration of the agricultural frontier also opens the way later in the course for examination of agrarian ideas in the modern West.

In the conflict between Per Hansa and Beret, Giants illustrates another problem characteristic of the western frontier experience: tension between cultural innovation and tradition. In Ox-Bow that outmoded tradition was the source of difficulty, and the same is true in Giants. Per Hansa can evolve new farming and living techniques, new attitudes toward land ownership, and new relationships with peoples unlike himself. He responds to the frontier as a challenge and glories in the adventure. His wife, on the other hand, sees the West as a howling wilderness filled with evil trolls who threaten her and her children. She fears the Indians and the non-Norwegian settlers, as well as the natural forces of the plains. Finding "no place to hide," she tries to hide in blind adherence to tradition, a tradition not adapted to the frontier. Thus she finally becomes a death force, in contrast to the life force of Per Hansa.

This whole problem of tradition versus innovation can lead to comparisons of several of the novels: Boone Caudill of The Big Sky fails because he insists upon complete freedom from any tradition, white or Indian; the Virginian gains success because he "learns" his way into a tradition and wins the school marm and a big ranch; the lynching of Ox-Bow happens because a tradition is being followed after its reason for being has been forgotten. The whole western experience has been one of tension between the new and the old.

Having examined major aspects of the West in the nineteenth century, we spend the latter portion of the course following the sequel to those aspects in the twentieth century, beginning with Frank Norris's The Octopus. To open this segment of the course, I introduce Frederick Jackson Turner and his Frontier Hypothesis, beginning with his observation that with the census of 1890, the land frontier in the West had closed.[7] If the existence of the frontier had been so important in shaping American civilization up to 1890, I ask my students, what became of those ideas in the nearly 90 years since that time? To what extent have we clung to the same ideas without the land frontier on which to exercise them? How have those ideas affected our generations, and how have they found expression in our literature?

We consider, for example, the development of the idea of wilderness as something to be conquered back when the wilderness was immense and clearly a threat to white settlements on its edges. Then we contrast that situation with the present status of "wilderness" in North America, primarily as relatively small, scattered fragments constantly being threatened with development, explored for minerals, scouted for timber. Given the change, we consider whether some of our historic and habitual attitudes toward wilderness are still valid or should be rethought. This can easily lead to an examination, both pro and con, of the philosophical bases of the modern conservation movement. We do not spend much time on the subject, but the bases for some of our common assumptions are clearly related to our tradition of "frontier" thinking after that frontier is gone.

In The Octopus, published in 1901, only eleven years after the Census Bureau had recorded the closing of the frontier, we have the mystical Eden image of the Seed Ranch and the agrarian Eden image of Annixter and his Quien Sabe Ranch. In contrast is the El Dorado image of Magnus Derrick.

All of these images are confronted by modern economic, political, and technological forces of large-scale, one-crop western farming for world markets, and of course by the railroad. This confrontation takes place at the opening of the twentieth century. The old ideas of the West collide disastrously in this novel with major realities of the modern West. The old ideal of the yeoman farmer working his modest acreage flickers briefly in the person of Dyke the hop rancher, and then is smashed by forces far beyond his control. The western land frontier is closed, as Turner observed, and that fact has cultural consequences for the whole nation. The old images no longer have any possibility of realization. Americans must either find other avenues by which to pursue their dreams, or find other dreams.

From this introduction to the twentieth century West we can move on to a number of other works that examine the effects of the old ideas of the West on modern American culture. The Great Gatsby, for example, takes place almost entirely on Long Island and in Manhattan. Yet, as Nick Carraway says near the end of the novel, it is really about the West. The presence of western ideas is suggested by West Egg and by the name of Jay Gatsby's mentor, Dan Cody, echoing both Daniel Boone and Buffalo Bill Cody. The El Dorado West has been the source of Cody's wealth. But the essential "westernness" of the novel lies in Gatsby's own attempt to escape, much like Boone Caudill and the Virginian, from time into space. He tries to leave Jimmy Gatz behind and to create himself, like Adam, from the soil of his own present and his own aspirations. And of course like the Dutch sailors at the end of the novel, confronted with the wonder of a wilderness continent that was to become, after all, only Long Island and the coast of New York, Gatsby's capacity for wonder finally came down only to Daisy--weak, limited, self-centered Daisy.

To change pace from the novel to drama, we use Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman, another work set in the East (Brooklyn) but based upon the standard images of the West. Willie Loman, torn between his pioneer's urge to plant new seed and to build with his own hands, and his El Dorado dream of the sudden wealth his brother Ben has achieved, sacrifices himself to the American dream of easy, groundless success, if not for himself, then for his sons. It is true that his brother Ben made his fortune in Africa, but the chance he offered Willie was in Alaska. Also, Biff's Edenic vision of "pouring cement on some prairie" is in the West.

Actually, Ben's adventures in Africa are all of a piece with his Alaska enterprises, with the image of his father the flute maker, and with the dreams of Willie and of Biff. Taking a broader view of our history, we can see that the great adventure of our western frontier in the nineteenth century was only a part of a greater adventure for all of western civilization, an adventure that began with the Renaissance and lasted until the early twentieth century. During that time, for our civilization, the frontier was world-wide. The explosion of energy and conquest that characterized those four centuries of our civilization reached into other wildernesses and pushed back other frontiers than that in western North America. The ambition, optimism, and energy that pushed Americans westward pushed other European stock into all the continents and islands of the globe. Ben's enterprises in Africa and Alaska were really part of the same adventure.

The tattered remnants of the twentieth century's agrarian Eden dream appear clearly in The Grapes of Wrath. A people who can remember how their parents and grandparents won their land from Indians and wilderness are driven from that land and move on westward. They expect again to reach the agrarian Eden, only to find the Promised Land (Goshen and Canaan are only varieties

of the new Eden) already taken. Again the old dreams of the West are smashed by the economic realities of the closed frontier. The West no longer offers the chance to escape from time into space. The space is filled and the Joads can no longer flee from their own history.

Perhaps the best novel with which to close this course is Wallace Stegner's Big Rock Candy Mountain. Bo Mason tries all the old ways to find the promise of the West: farming, mining, gambling in various forms, traveling all over the West looking for the big breakthrough, living always on the hopes of the future and never realizing any of them. Bo has all of the pioneer virtues--he is strong, brave, resourceful, energetic, a crack shot, clever with tools--but, like Willie Loman, he has the wrong dreams. He ends, as his son observes, with a neat and workmanlike job of murder and suicide.

Bo Mason is an especially useful figure with which to close the course, if we have begun with Boone Caudill of The Big Sky. Bo and Boone are almost twins both in appearance and in personality. Both are big, broad shouldered, unusually strong, swarthy, black-haired, short tempered, independent, and finally immature. Throughout Big Rock Candy Mountain people comment on Bo's pioneer virtues of strength and skill. They say that he should have been born a hundred years sooner. But Boone Caudill, his twin, was born a hundred years sooner, and his fate is no better than Bo's. Both wanted a kind of freedom that is not possible for humans, because humans cannot avoid social needs--wives, friends, children. What we conclude, then, is that some dreams of the West, those of Boone, and of Bo, never had hope for success, even when there was a frontier still open.

Where does this leave us, then? Have all of our dreams of the West been a tragic, or even pitiful, mistake? Is the whole American dream, which was tied for so long to the seemingly limitless resources of the West, merely

foolish after all? Near the end of the semester some of my more thoughtful students are beginning to ask such questions. And so we go back and look at those dreams again.

Many of those dreams have, built into them, the inevitability of failure. The very process of attaining his dream and enjoying it doomed the mountain man's wilderness to destruction. Every time the American Adam entered a North American Eden, either as new savage or as farmer, he brought with him, within himself, the old Serpent that would destroy Eden once again. He could never completely escape from time into space, because he could never completely transcend his old nature as a human. So the original dream could never have been realized in full. But has that unrealized dream nevertheless driven us to achieve something worthwhile, even if it has not been what we intended? That is the question I leave to the class. Nick Carraway says that Jay Gatsby is worth more than all the others, not because he achieved his dream, because he did not, but because he at least had a dream. He was driven forward by something outside the moment and outside himself. The dreaming itself was the achievement, not the accomplishment of the dream.

"Easterns" such as Death of a Salesman and The Great Gatsby help demonstrate ways in which ideas generated by the West and the western frontier have become important in our national thought and our national literature: our search for freedom from the past or from social obligations; our yearning to own a little piece of ground if only in the suburbs; our perception of wilderness (or "nature") as normative while at the same time urging more and more "development;" and perhaps most important of all, our nearly invincible optimism that our condition can always be made better than it has been. These essentially western images have oftentimes created waste, irresponsibility, injustice, and disillusionment. Properly understood, perhaps these ills can

be avoided. Perhaps the tension these images create between reality and expectation can lead us still to achievements that will be, like Fitzgerald's "green breast of the New World," commensurate to our capacity for wonder.

This, then, is how I use the study of the literature of the American West as a window into American culture. In this paper I have emphasized the cultural and historical context of the works and have not examined the works themselves in detail. In the course itself, we spend most of our time explicating the works in considerable detail, but we do so within the cultural and historical context which I have outlined here. The final result, I hope, is a clearer understanding by the students of their own culture, their own vision of America, and their own relationship to the landscape. Perhaps it is idealistic, but I hope it also persuades them that it is worth the risk of disappointment to go on dreaming of something better.

Footnotes

1. The Sound of Mountain Water (New York, 1969), p. 170.

2. See, for example, Vardis Fisher, "The Western Writer and the Eastern Establishment," Western American Literature, I (Winter, 1967), 244-259; and A.B. Guthrie, Jr., "Why Write About the West?" WAL, III (Fall, 1972), 163-169.

3. These early myths are summarized by Samuel Eliot Morison, The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages A.D. 500-1600 (New York, 1971), in Chapter I, "The Mysterious Ocean," pp. 3-12. See also Howard Mumford Jones, O Strange New World (New York, 1964), pp. 1-34.

4. Perhaps the single most comprehensive discussion of the development of most of these images is by Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (Cambridge, Mass., 1950).

5. Walter Prescott Webb, The Great Plains (New York, 1931), pp. 8-9.

6. The Big Sky (New York: Sentry Edition, 1965), p. 385.

7. The Frontier in American History (New York, 1920).